

TESTIMONY OF THE

CONNECTICUT COALITION
FOR ***JUSTICE***
IN EDUCATION FUNDING

TO THE

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

March 11, 2015

Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee:
The Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding (CCJEF) appreciates this opportunity to submit comments on one of the bills before you today.

SB 1056, An Act Concerning the Excess Cost Threshold and the Collection of Data Relating to Per Pupil Costs for Special Education

Year after year school districts, municipalities, CCJEF, and others come before this legislative body to urge removal of the cap on the Special Education Excess Cost Grant and the lowering of the reimbursement threshold. The success rate in accomplishing these important fiscal feats, however, has been poor. SB 1056 offers small steps forward by kicking the can down the road to the next two biennial budgets (FY18-19 and FY20-21), despite avoiding any commitment to full funding of the Excess Cost Grant at any point in the future.

Given the inconsistent funding record of the State with regard to the ECS formula and special education over the years, are we really to hold dear such distant promises that future Administrations and legislatures may well alter before they take effect?

Based on data available on the CSDE website, it appears that **over the past 6 years — FY09-14, coinciding with the serious flattening of ECS funding — the State has paid out \$522.3 million in Excess Cost, plus \$77.3 million in Excess Cost Student Supplements.** (Revenue from other state agencies, Medicare reimbursements, or other federal sources are not counted in these figures, inasmuch as those data are not publicly available on a town-by-town basis.) [Data source: <https://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/dgm/grantreports1/SpTrExpSelect.aspx>]

Yet over these same 6 years, municipalities and their school districts have expended some \$10.3 billion on special education services. Keep in mind that these are *marginal costs*, i.e., what it costs to educate special education students over and above what it costs to educate

“regular program” students. From FY09 to FY14, special education expenditures have grown by 18%, peaking at nearly \$1.85 billion this past fiscal year. By contrast, the same CSDE data show that Total Current Expenditures (TCI) over those 6 years have grown by less than 11%.

Bringing this information down to a district level

- In 2013-14, a quarter or more of Total Current Expenditures went to special education in 28 districts: Lebanon, Lisbon, New Hartford, Stonington, Wilton, and Windsor (25%); Ansonia, Griswold, Guilford, Hamden, Hartford, New London, Norwich, Pomfret, and Torrington (26%); Canterbury, Ledyard, Southington, West Haven, and Willington (27%); Darien, Deep River, Essex, and New Britain (28%); Killingly, Preston, and Sterling (29%); Winchester (30%).
- Also in 2013-14, the median district spent 22% of its Total Current Expenditures on special education. (Highest was 30%, lowest 11%.)
- Across the 6 years of special education expenditures examined, many of the above-listed districts repeatedly appeared in the 25% or more special education high-spending bracket. Five districts — Ledyard, New Britain, New London, Norwich, and Sterling — spent more than one-fourth their Total Current Expenditures on special education all 6 years.
- That such high special education expenditures are unsustainable for any community, let alone for low-wealth/high-needs academically struggling school districts, is obvious. That in far too many municipalities/districts the fiscal pressures of special education services significantly constrain the resources needed for schools’ basic education programs that serve all children, and thereby limit important learning opportunities, particularly for non-special needs students, should be equally obvious.

All this, of course, gets to the heart of the matter: that the Excess Cost Grant is just one small portion of an immense fiscal burden that municipalities and their school districts continue to carry. To be clear, however, what we object to is not the requirement to provide high-quality special education services for all children who need same (CCJEF strongly supports that!), but rather to the State’s continued failure to pay its fair share while continuing its longstanding habit of pushing down those costs to the local level. Further, an adequately and equitably funded PK-12 school finance system would finally provide all districts the resources necessary to effectively intervene with learning problems early enough and on a sustained level that the incidence and cost of special education should greatly be reduced.

In sum, we take Sec. 1(b)(C-F), lines 23-43, with a grain of salt, for it’s the quintessential kicking the can down the road. When the time comes to implement those threshold reductions, it’s likely that the statute will again be amended — and/or the cap on the Excess Cost Grant (not addressed in this bill at all) will substantially negate any relief towns/districts might expect.

In Sec. 2(c)(7)(C), for the sake of fiscal transparency, we urge that Strategic School Profile data pertaining to special education be required also to include the total sum submitted by the district for Excess Cost reimbursement and the actual amount received. In addition, as this Committee knows, traditional public school districts are required to reimburse magnet and charter schools for special education services provided to any enrolled choice students who live in their “sending” towns. Accordingly, amounts paid by each traditional district to magnet and charter schools for special education services should be separately detailed among the SSP special education data. (None of the information here sought is publically available elsewhere.)

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The Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding (CCJEF) is a broad-based coalition of municipalities, local boards of education, statewide professional education associations, unions, other pro-education advocacy organizations, parents and Connecticut schoolchildren aged 18 or older, and other concerned Connecticut taxpayers. Member school communities are home to more than half of all public school students, including some three-fourths of all minority students, those from low-income families, and students from homes where English is not the primary language.

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